

Hercules – the movie star

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Every age has its Hercules. Medieval kings, Renaissance princes and modern dictators have all lined-up to wrap themselves in his lion-skin. Whenever western culture has needed to think about size, strength, virtue or masculinity, it has turned to Hercules. Hercules is all man, but he is more than man. He is drunkard, glutton, lover, fighter, hero, and doting father. At home in high society, he is also the perpetual outsider. Through Hercules we live our dreams and escape our nightmares. We should not be surprised then that the twentieth century has not been able to escape his charms. Through the cinematic lens, Hercules has been recreated for a modern audience and modern sensibilities.

The Hercules cinematic phenomenon begins with the extraordinary success of *Hercules* (1957) starring Steve Reeves, and constitutes one of the most popularly successful and significant classicizing movements of the twentieth century. Rarely has classical myth captivated, entertained and enthused so many people. In the space of eight years, over thirty films featuring Hercules were produced and released. This industry was initially based in Italy and, France with dubbed voices being added for US and UK release. The films were widely known as ‘peplum movies’, after the Greek word for the short tunic worn by the heroes. The revenue they generated ensured that Hollywood was not far behind, with the release of a number of films that either placed themselves squarely within this genre or satirically alluded to it.

In terms of storyline, Hercules films fall into three narrative types: those still loosely associated with ancient mythological narratives (e.g. *Hercules* (1957) and *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963)); new narratives set in the ancient world and involving characters from ancient myth (e.g. *Hercules and the Captive Women* (1961), *Hercules at the Centre of the Earth* (1961), *Hercules and the Tyrants of Babylon* (1964)); and narratives that treat the hero as a fantasy figure capable of appearing in any geographical place or historical time (e.g. *The Fury of Hercules* (1961), *Hercules Against the Mongols* (1963), *Hercules and the Black Pirates* (1964), *Hercules vs. the Moon Men* (1964)). Often this last genre of films was released under a variety of titles with the name of the protagonist (Hercules, Maciste, and Samson) chosen to reflect local taste or expectations.

However, no matter wherever or whenever we encounter Hercules, he still manages to retain certain recognizable features. Our Hercules always has the same ‘look’. In a culture profoundly uncomfortable with the male body, the Hercules films provided a method by which viewers could admire and examine the body of a ‘real man’. The popular visual image of Hercules has been predominantly shaped by the casting of bodybuilders to play the hero. Steve Reeves (Mr. America, 1948; Mr. World, 1948; and Mr. Universe, 1948, 1950) began a peplum tradition that continued with actors like Reg Park (Mr. Britain, 1949; Mr. Europe, 1950; and Mr. Universe, 1958) and Mark Forest (Mr. Muscle Beach and Mr. Venice Beach, 1954), and persisted to the 1972 casting of Arnold Schwarzenegger in his first movie role in *Hercules in New York*. The visual realization of Hercules by bodybuilders necessarily framed the aesthetic of the male hero within a certain set of body conventions. The body is deeply muscled, its definition emphasized by tanned, oiled skin, and obscured by as little clothing as possible, even when every other character is fully covered. It is often displayed in bodybuilder poses, glistening from the sweat produced by labours of superhuman strength. Each of the labours takes a prolonged period of time to complete, maximizing the audi-

ence’s opportunity to take voyeuristic pleasure in the heroic body.

Hercules’ body is differentiated from those of others. His tanned and oiled skin is frequently contrasted with the matte white skin of the heroine. His enemies are often depicted as members of non-western ethnic groups: the oriental princes in *Hercules Against the Mongols*; the near-eastern devotees of *Hercules vs. the Moon Men* and *Hercules and the Captive Women*; Incas in *Hercules against the Sons of the Sun* (1964). Hercules is strictly a European hero, representing the West, and especially (bearing in mind the casting of US bodybuilders) America, with strength and justice. The American way of life is especially recalled in the spit-roast barbecues that feature in most of the films. With his suckling pig kebab in hand, Hercules is no vegetarian.

Hercules’ masculinity is strongly defined by his relationships with women. Most of the films offer a contrasting pair of women for the hero’s love interest: a powerful ambitious woman (often a queen), and a more domestic girl-next-door type. Both women desire Hercules, but it is the ambitious queen who openly acts on this desire, unnaturally usurping the male courtship role, often with the help of drugs (e.g. Queen Antinea in *Hercules and the Captive Women*, Queen Samara in *Hercules vs. the Moon Men*) or other magical means. The narrative imperative demands Hercules to disempower and defeat these evil, unnatural women. While the end of the film sees him riding (in *Hercules*, sailing) off into the sunset with the unambitious, wholly feminine girl-next-door.

It is not just female empowerment that Hercules fights against. He is no fan of the democratic collective either, as he shows in *Jason and the Argonauts*, putting the entire crew at risk for his own desires. Hercules is no co-operative hero. Even when confronted with situations requiring the help of others (‘Only Queen Canidia can save Hercules from the “Pit of Death”’ – *The Fury of Hercules*), Hercules’ acceptance of assistance from others is only ever provisional. Cut to the next scene, and he’s off again battling alone.

Hercules stands firmly with nature, as against civilisation. The cinema audiences may have been enjoying food additives, artificial fabrics and the space race; in the world of Hercules, however, technology can only ever be a force for evil. His heroism derives only from his natural abilities: his strength, his resourcefulness, his divine parentage. ‘My hands are enough’ he declares in *Hercules Against the Mongols*. These natural abilities are constantly pitted against the machines, traps, and weaponry of his opponents. His success proves the fallibility of such technology, and the misguidedness of those who rely on it to underwrite power. It is hard not to feel the technophobic anxiety of the ‘Atomic Age’.

Freedom is almost always the object of these battles. The narratives are driven by the liberation of oppressed communities by unjust rulers (vampy queens or feminized males). It is up to Hercules to ‘bring justice’ to these communities. His association with freedom is emphasized by his frequent depiction in chains (offering more opportunities for muscular posing as he breaks out of them) and the use of whips by his adversaries. Man is no beast to be tied up and flogged: Hercules strives against the limits placed upon individual freedom by tyrannical figures.

This sympathy with humankind in the broadest sense is one of the most significant features of the Hercules cinematic tradition. The fortunes of Hercules as a hero had fallen sharply from

the end of the eighteenth century onwards. Hercules' infallibility and perfection had caused him to fall foul of the romantic tradition, which liked its heroes a little flawed. It is no coincidence that the only visions of Hercules that excited enthusiasm in this period were of Hercules suffering on a pyre or wracked by remorse for his murderous deeds. Cinema's great contribution to the mythic tradition, by way of contrast, was the invention of the 'human Hercules'. Hercules was god made man – a story, of course, with an impeccable pedigree. In both *Hercules* (1957) and the Disney *Hercules* (1997), the hero denies his immortality for the love of a mortal woman. It's the story of Christ, but with a love interest. Heroism is explicated in terms of an internal moral and psychological struggle more than the external physical completion of a series of challenges and labours.

The 'peplum movie' petered out in the mid-sixties and the odd Hollywood attempt to revive the genre (*Hercules* (1983) with Lou Ferrigno, *Hercules in New York*) failed to engage box office enthusiasm. More recently though, we have seen the Disney-animated *Hercules*, and the television series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* presenting the hero to a new audience. Despite the change in medium, the cinematic presentation of the hero as bringer of justice and as body beautiful persists, proving the influence of the pepla Hercules in popular perceptions of the mythological hero. Small-screen or wide-screen, animated or live action, Hercules refuses to be beaten.

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